DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 255 842 CG 018 174

AUTHOR McAdoo, Harriette
TITLE Work Roles and Coping Strategies of Employed Single Afro-American Mothers.
PUB DATE 13 Oct 83
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council on Family Relations (St. Paul, MN, October 11-15, 1983). Best copy available.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adjustment (to Environment); *Black Mothers; *Coping; Employed Parents; *Employed Women; Family Relationship; *Fatherless Family; Financial Problems; Mothers; *Role Conflict; Social Support Groups; *Stress Variables

ABSTRACT

Women who must raise their children alone and who are in the labor market have been found to have high levels of stress. Existing data from 318 black, single, employed women with full custody of their children were examined with regard to their work patterns, possible conflicts with their families and their work, and the strategies that they used in coping with these conflicts. The women were found to have very high levels of actual and perceived stress and were found to be under very high stress in financial and work-related areas. The women experienced stress and conflict in the roles that they were attempting to maintain. Of the three types of coping studied, (i.e., Type I, structural role definition; Type II, personal role redefinition; and Type III, reacting role behavior), the women most often chose Type III, the least healthy coping strategy. The supportive networks and linkages between the women and their families appeared to provide much needed support. Mothers who maintained frequent and warm relationships with their families of orientation were found to be under lower levels of stress. (NRB)

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WORK ROLES AND COPING STRATEGIES OF EMPLOYED SINGLE AFRO-AMERICAN MOTHERS

Harriette McAdoo, Ph.D.
Howard University

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Paper presented at the National Council on Family Relations Annual Meeting, October 13, 1983 St. Paul, Minnesota

Work Roles and Coping Strategies of Employed Single Afro-American Mothers

Harriette McAdoo, Ph.D.
Howard University

The phenomena of women who are raising their children without a spouse, who are employed in the labor market, has been an increasing trend within all American families and especially within Afro-American families. However, this increased labor force participation has not meant that these women and their children have become more economically secure. Today women with children alone are increasingly becoming impoverished, regardless of their labor-force participation (Pearce and McAdoo, 1981). These women who are employed have been restricted to low-paying jobs with limited advancement potential (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1982). This process has been called the feminization of poverty, a phrase that is particularly relevant to single women of color.

Most women who support themselves and their children do so without depending upon public or private charity. Yet women are poor, even when they receive some form of child support or alimony. Even if they are employed, their poverty level is high. In 1981, the poverty level was established to be $7,250 for a family of three and $9,290 for a family of four. Poverty increased when there were more children. In 1981 the levels for single employed Black women with one, two, and three children were 26%, 4 %, and 57% respectively. (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 1983).

Women who must raise their children alone and who are in the labor market have been found to have high levels of stress (McAdoo, 1983). Other writers have found that employed women both black and white, who work while rearing children, experience a fair amount of conflict between their roles at work and at home, regardless of marital status (Harrison & Minor, 1978). It is assumed that these women will experience these conflicts and be under high levels of stress.

The purpose of this paper is to examine a group of Black, single employed women with full custody of their children, in an attempt to look at their work patterns, possible conflicts with their families and their work, and the strategies that they use in coping with these conflicts.

It was assumed that when women are under a great deal of stress and when they are facing conflicts within certain important areas of their lives, that they will be unable to do an effective job of parenting their children and meeting all of the responsibilities that they face as single mothers.

Role Conflicts

The roles that women play have been found to be conflictual in several studies. Aldous (1978) found that parental and marital roles are conflictual for women and compete for temporal and emotional priority. Women who have full responsibility for the parenting role and who have to play work roles, are expected to have even greater stress and conflicts.

When women are faced with conflicts between their roles, and they are providing both the expressive and instrumental needs of their children, they will undoubtedly face conflicts in their roles as mother, provider, and employee. They will have conflicting demands upon their time, emotions, finances and often will be unable to successfully meet all of the expectations that they may have set for themselves and their children and employers. Hall (1972) has outlined three types of coping strategies that are used when such conflicts occur:

Type I Structural role definition. The mother can establish new sets of expectations for herself, for her children and her employers. She will negotiate between all of these "role senders" to expect only realistic behavior of her. For example, she may try to meet her obligations on the job, but will tell her boss that she cannot work overtime because she must be at the daycare center before 5:45 p.m. to pick up her child. She will decide what is possible for her to do and refuse to feel guilty if she has to forego some tasks that she has done in the past, such as keeping a spotless house.

Type II Personal role redefinition. The woman can cope with conflict by redefining her own roles, establishing priorities for the roles, or by eliminating certain role-related tasks. For example, the woman may decide that she has to quit her job and go on welfare or that she will continue working and send the children to live with their grandparents for a short period.

Type III Reacting role behavior. The woman will continue to meet all of the demands that are placed upon her. She will attempt to be a "super mom," become more organized, work after the children go to sleep and not attempt to meet her own personal needs.

Harrison and Minor (1977) found that married employed women tended to use Type II strategies of making priorities and not redefining the expectations of anyone. The role of mother was prioritized over that of worker or wife. They simply attempted to cope as best they could and respond in traditional ways to conflict and stress. In a later study of single and married women Harrison and Minor (1978) found that the married mothers used Type II, while the single mothers used Type III, the least healthy choice. When the conflicts grew too large women reacted by eliminating one role. White women eliminated the work role and Black women eliminated the marital role.

Stress

In contrasting the stress impact of the three coping types, the most healthy strategy would be Type I, because the woman would cause modifications in both the internal and external expectations for her. She would be able to change her own internal perceptions of what is appropriate behavior for a woman in her position and she would be able to modify the expectations of others for her.

Stress has been defined both in terms of the intensity and frequency of significant life events that occur within families (McAdoo, 1978, McAdoo, 1980, Belle, 1980). Stress also may be defined in terms of how the women themselves perceive the stress from the various sources within their lives.

Holmes and Rahe (1967) defined stress in terms of the impact of certain significant life events that are experienced by individuals and the family as a whole. Stress scores were assigned to each event over a two-year period and for this paper these scores are labeled intensity scores. However, because of the restrictiveness of the original scale (several significant female-related events were not included), and the sample upon which it was standardized (non-black), other measurements were taken: the frequency of these events occurring within the family and the frequency of additional female-related events. In addition, we have the mothers' perception of the extent of stress that they themselves feel in nine of the sources that are contained within the S.L.E. scales. With this combination of assessments, it was felt that a more accurate measurement of the actual stress within their lives would be obtained.

Based upon a review of literature, certain hypotheses were generated:

1. These single Black mothers will have high levels of actual and perceived stress in their lives, especially in the areas of finances and related to their work.
2. Women who perceive that they are under high levels of stress at work will have experienced more severe and frequent negative significant life events.
3. The majority of the women will experience conflicts in their roles related to work and to mothering and with their job satisfaction.
4. When conflicts do occur, the single women will tend to choose the emotionally unhealthy coping strategies.
5. Levels of stress will be higher for women who choose Type II and Type III strategies.

Methods

Sample

This was a secondary analysis of an existing data set of 318 single Black women from Baltimore, who are employed and have full custody of their children who are up through high school age. The sample was drawn from volunteers from an income stratified list of all approved day care and nursery schools in Baltimore City with an appropriate Black enrollment of at least 25%. Additional older volunteers were con-

tacted through the large women's center's employment service.

All of the women were single, but half had been married earlier (see Table 1). Over half of the women were 19 years or older when they had their first child, but two-thirds were not married at the time.

They were not now replicating earlier family patterns, for 70% of them grew up in two-parent homes and their parents were in their mid (mothers) or late (fathers) twenties when these women were born.

They had an average age of 30 years when they were interviewed and their median income was $12,000. Some level of financial support was provided by the fathers for 37% of the families. Almost half of them received help on a regular basis from family members, with the most help being received from their own mothers (28%) and their male friends (10%).

Results

Stress

The women were found to be intense and continuing levels of stress in many aspects of their lives. They received stress intensity scores that would put them at the level that Holmes and Rahe found in clinical studies to be predictive of later emotional or physical illness within a rather short period of time. The significant life events occurred frequently in their families in both the standard events scale and in the subscale related to female concerns (rape, unwanted pregnancy or birth, lover was unfaithful, etc.).

Hypotheses 1 was supported for they perceived that the source of the greatest stress in their lives came from finances, housing and work. All of these are finally linked. Work stress was rated higher than even parenting (see Table 2).

Work-related Stress

Hypotheses 2 was also supported, for the women who perceived that they were under high levels of work-related stress had actually experienced frequent significant life changes in their lives in general, had S.L.E. that were intense and had frequently experienced gender-related stress, for all were correlated ($p < .001$)(see Table 4)

Women who had experienced great stress at work, perceived that they were under significantly higher levels of changes in their personal habits with health problems, and with problems in their personal relations.

Demography Differences in Perceived Stress

Significant differences in levels of perceived stress were not found on the demographic variables of marital status, age or marital status at first pregnancy, religion or income (see Table 3). However, there was a definite trend for stress to be higher for those women who had lower incomes. Linkages were found between family structural and household structural variables. Women who lived with their children and other family members had significantly lower levels of perceived stress ($M = 35.75$) than those who lived alone with their children ($M = 42.41$) or in any other type of arrangement ($M = 44.07$; $F(2,298) = 4.64$, $p < .01$)

The highest levels of stress were the women who were living with their children and other nonrelatives. Often these were other single mothers and their children, sometimes they were dependent older relatives, especially with women who had higher incomes. Seldom were these nonrelatives reported to be men with whom they were romantically involved (6%). Their housemates tended to be persons who may also be under stress and who may be making demands upon them for financial or emotional support.

Role Conflicts

It had been predicted (hypothesis 3) that the majority of the women would experience conflicts between their work and family roles. Conflicts were found on two areas of conflict, but not on the third. Just over half of the women reported that they experienced conflicts between their roles of mother and worker (54%) and between their children and their work (52%). However, only a third (33%) felt conflicts between their role of mother and their job satisfaction. (See Table 5.) These responses indicated a significant association between the presence of conflict and the particular type of

possible conflict ($X^2(2) = 34.02$, $p < .001$).

When conflicts were reported by the women, each was asked about how they handled each of these conflicts. Their responses were coded according to Hall's typologies into three types. Each response was evaluated independently by two coders, with a reliability of .88. In cases of differences between the coders, discussions were then held between the two until they could reach agreement upon the consensual final code.

The fourth hypothesis, that when conflicts were present the least healthy coping strategy would be used by the women was supported, for the majority of them selected Type III for each of the possible points of conflict. For work and mother conflicts, 64% selected Type III and 13% used Type I. When conflicts arose with work and their children, 73% selected Type III and 21% chose Type I. The same pattern was found in the coping strategy selected for mother role and job satisfaction, for 65% selected Type III and only 6% selected Type I, the healthiest choice. The association was significant between the type of strategy used and the type of conflict with the women overwhelmingly selecting Type III ($X^2(4) = 33.76$, $p < .001$).

An average strategy type score was obtained for each woman and again the distribution of scores indicated that they were using the unhealthiest strategy across all of the possible points of conflict.

Stress and Coping Strategies

The last step was to examine the differential levels of stress for the women who made each of the three choices on the summary scores. It was hypothesized that women who selected Type II and Type III would have higher levels of stress. This was supported only as related to the children and work role question about the children disliking the mothers' work. No significant differences were found in stress for the women on work-mother strategies or on mother-job satisfaction.

When the mothers reported that the children disliked their working, mothers who used Type II (personal role definition) had significantly higher stress intensity ($M = 228.80$), than those who selected Type III ($M = 217.20$) or Type I($M = 156.64$; $F(2,162) = 3.13$, $p < .05$). The same results were found on stress frequency, Type II

mothers (M = 11.60) and Type III (M = 10.35) were higher than Type I (M = 7.85; $F(2,162) = 3.18$, $p < .05$). Mothers who selected the choices that Hall had considered the healthiest, requiring the boss and children who were senders of "role expectations" to modify their expectations, had the lowest levels of stress intensity and frequency.

Summary

This group of single Black mothers was found to have very high levels of actual and perceived stress and were found to be under very high stress in financial aspects and those aspects related to their work. The women experienced stress and conflicts in the roles that they were attempting to maintain. The strategies that they were using with these conflicts were for the most part putting greater stress upon themselves. However, those who were making the most assertive coping strategies were those who were able to maintain themselves in these roles with the lowest levels of stress.

These women were making choices that were similar to those in Harrison's and Minor's study, with the one exception that they will be unable to eliminate any of the roles that may become too overwhelming for them. Their financial and marital status precludes them from some earlier choices, for these women are permanently in a state of single parenthood. One positive aspect of their dilemma is that the supportive networks and linkages between the women and their families appear to be providing the much needed support that they need. Mothers who are to maintain frequent and warm relationships with their own family of orientation have been found to be under lower levels of stress. The importance of the linkages between family and work can not be overlooked as the trend intensifies as more women have full financial custody of their children and must be able to blend and maintain these two roles of mother and worker.

Table 1

Selected Background Characteristics of Single Mothers (N=318)

Variable	Total Percentage
Previous marital status	
Ever married	56
Never married	44
	100%
Marital status	
Separated	26
Divorced	29
Widowed	2
Never	44
	101%
Married, 1st pregnancy	
Yes	27
No	73
	100%
Age, 1st pregnancy	
18 and under	46
19 and over	54
	100%
Present age	
Under 30	54
Over 30	46
	100%
Family structure	
Attenuated nuclear (mother-child)	66
Attenuated extended (mother, child/ren, relatives)	25
Augmented attenuated nuclear (mother, child, nonrel.)	7
Augmented attenuated extended (mother, child, relative, nonrelative)	2
	100%

Socioeconomic Status	Total Percentage
Income	
Less than 5,999	9
6,000- 8,999	16
9,000-11,999	24
12,000-14,999	19
15,000-17,999	12
18,000-23,999	13
24,000 +	7
	100%
Education	
Grade School	-
Junior High School	3
High School/Trade School	
1-2 yrs. college	
3-4 yrs. college	
Graduate/Professional	
	1 %
Occupation	
Executive/major, lesser professional	25
Administrative personnel	12
Owner of bus./clerical	47
Skilled/semi-skilled	14
Unskilled	3
	101%
Religion	
Baptist	49
Methodist	18
Catholic	14
Other Protestant	15
No religion	4
	100%

Class		Hollingshead-Redlich	Modified	If Rating
I	Upper	1	11	
II	Middle	27	20	
III	Working	53	53	45
IV	Lower	17	15	15
V	Under	3	1	100
	Total	101	100	
	N = 318			

Table 2

Rankings and Intercorrelations of Mothers' Perceptions of Stressors (N = 301)

Rank	Stressor	Mean	SD
1	Money	7.54	2.90
2	Housing	5.55	3.67
3	Work	5.08	3.17
4	Male-Female Relations	4.83	3.20
5	Parenting	4.37	2.98
6	Health	3.86	2.94
7	Personal Relations	3.84	2.95
8	Legal	3.19	3.07
9	Personal Habits	3.05	2.47
	Total	41.26	14.03

Intercorrelations of Perception of Sources of Stress as Reported by Single Mothers

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 Housing										
2 Money	r	.377								
	p	.000								
3 Health	r	.233	.318							
	p	.000	.000							
4 Pers. Habits	r	.149	.179	.282						
	p	.005	.001	.000						
5 Work	r	.082	.207	.091	.191					
	p	-	.000	-	.000					
6 Male/Female	r	.136	.238	.248	.238	.157				
	p	.009	.000	.000	.000	.003				
7 Personal Rela.	r	.126	.236	.217	.260	.125	.492			
	p	.02	.000	.000	.000	.02	.000			
8 Parenting	r	.085	.210	.236	.170	.215	.267	.241		
	p	-	.000	.000	.002	.000	.000	.000		
9 Legal	r	.081	.119	.186	.230	.038	.152	.192	.187	
	p	-	.02	.001	.000	-	.004	.000	.001	
10 Total Stress	r	.504	.604	.573	.527	.438	.608	.593	.537	.447
	p	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	00

Table 3

Means and Analysis of Variance of Perceived Stress by Demographic Variables

Demographic Variable	Group	Perceived Stress N	M	SD
Marital Status	Never married	130	39.21	13.90
	Separated	76	43.07	14.67
	Divorced	89	41.85	16.07
	Widowed	6	49.17	12.04
		301		
Household Structure	Mother & child	199	42.47	14.21 1/
	Mother, child, kin	74	35.74	15.30
	Mother, child, nonkin	22	45.23	14.93
	Mother, child, kin, nonkin	6	37.67	16.54
		301		
Family Structure	Nuclear	200	42.41	14.20 2/
	Extended	74	35.74	15.30
	Augmented	27	44.07	15.83
		301		
Age at 1st pregnancy	18 & younger	140	40.82	14.56
	19 & older	158	41.74	15.04
		298		
Married 1st pregnancy	Yes	77	42.39	15.05
	No	222	40.86	14.73
		299		
Religion	Baptist	146	40.69	15.83
	Methodist	56	40.89	13.68
	Catholic	42	39.62	12.83
	Other Protestant	46	43.87	14.74
	None	11	43.36	14.29
		301		
Income	$ 5,000 less	74	42.62	13.03
	6- 8,900	129	42.33	15.21
	9-11,900	67	39.51	15.61
	12-14,900	14	38.64	15.97
	15 +	11	32 18	14.13
		295		

1/ F (3,297) = 3.32, $p < .01$

2/ F (2,298) = 4.64, $p < .01$

Table 4

Identification of Relation and of Interactions of Former Teen Mothers with "Close" Relatives and Friends

Type of Relationship

Relative	Closest	2nd Closest
Mother	54%	13%
Sister	20	35
Father	6	14
Nephew	-	11
Brother	3	7
Fem. cousin	5	4
Children	2	4
Grandmother	3	2
Aunt	3	-
Male cousin	-	2
Mother-in-law	-	2
Sister-in-law	-	2
Uncle	1	1
Father-in-law	1	-
Child's father	1	-
Godparent	1	-
Niece	-	1
Stepmother	-	1
Stepfather	-	1
	100%	100%
	N=143	N=121

Friend	Closest	2nd Closest
Close, female	75%	81%
Close, male	12	12
Romantic, male	13	7
	100%	100%
	N=130	N=86

Frequency of Interaction

Relative	Closest	2nd Closest
Daily	35%	26%
Weekly	41	43
Monthly	11	19
Twice/6 mos.	10	9
Once/6 mos.	4	2
	101%	99%
	N=142	N=120

Friend	Closest	2nd Closest
Daily	40%	34%
Weekly	37	47
Monthly	18	16
Twice/6 mos.	4	1
Once/6 mos.	2	1
	101%	99%
	N=130	N=85

Identified as Significant Other

Relative		
	Yes	46%
	No	54
		100%
		N=140

Friend		
	Yes	40%
	No	60
		100%
		N=126

Table 5

Chi-square of Types of Role Conflicts by Presence of Conflicts and Coping Strategies Used

	Role Conflicts: Mother & Worker Roles F	%	Children & Worker Roles F	%	Mother Role & Job Satisfaction F	%	X^2	df	p
Conflict Present									
Never	145	(46)	151	(48)	211	(67)	34.02		.001
Sometimes	170	(54)	164	(52)	104	(33)			
Total	315	(100)	315	(100)	315	(100)			
Coping Strategies Used if Present									
Type I 1/	21	(13)	35	(21)	7	(6)	33.76	4	.001
Type II	35	(22)	10	(6)	32	(29)			
Type III	101	(64)	122	(73)	72	(65)			
Total	157	(99)	167	(100)	100	(100)			

Summary 2/ of Average Strategy Type

Type	Scores	Frequency Used	%	
I	5	22	9	
	4	12	5	
II	3	53	21	
III	2	68	26	
	1	102	40	
		257	101	N=257

1/ Preferred, more healthy strategy

2/ Summary coping score is average score $\left(\frac{\Sigma \text{freq. of each type}}{\text{No. of conflicts}}\right)$. The healthier strategy has higher score.

Table 6

Regression Analysis of Family Patterns Predicting Perceived Stress

Predictor	r	R^2	Beta	F	(df)
Family Affection					
Satisfaction with family situation	.333***	.11	.31	1.32	(5,273)
Attitude toward family contact	.127	.12	.10	1.02	
Closeness of family members	.155	.13	.09	13.66**	
Attitude about family aid	-.014	.13	-.07	10.55**	
How much family help meant	.094	.14	.06	8.71*	
Kin Proximity					
Often see closest kin	.096	.01	.11	2.50	(5,263)
Number of kin feel close to	-.052	.01	-.07	1.83	
Kinship propinquity of helpers	-.031	.01	-.03	1.29	
Geographic proximity (miles)	.034	.01	-.07	1.00	
Residential proximity	.060	.02	.06	0.90	
Kin Interaction					
Ease to visit kin	.314**	.10	.23	14.05**	(6,123)
Frequency talk with recip. kin	-.195*	.14	-.25	10.15**	
Number kin count on to help	.260**	.18	.23	9.47**	
Obligation to kin	-.067	.19	- 07	7.23**	
Kinship propinquity-recip.	.047	.19	.05	5.83*	
Ease kin to visit R	.193*	.19	.02	4.83*	

N=130

* < p .05
** < p .01
*** < p .001

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